

Who Am I ? The Cultural Identity of Teenages

Wong Seet Leng
Faculty of Education
University of Malaya

Summary of Paper

Identity is a person's conception and expression of their individuality or group affiliations such as national identity or cultural identity. In general, cultural groups differ based on their members' beliefs, values and norms, or behavior patterns. Nonetheless, language is a main component of cultural identity. This study aims to find out the views and perceptions of the secondary students on Chinese language, Chinese cultural values, and preservation and transmission of cultural traditions.

Methodology

The respondents of this study comprised of 100 secondary students, with 50 from each of the two schools situated in an urban area. There are 63 boys and 35 girls, aged between 16 to 18 years old. This is considered a homogeneous group as all of them was educated in Chinese primary schools and now studying in Chinese independent schools with similar campus ambience and using the same curriculum.

A questionnaire with 15 questions was use in data collection. Part A asked about the life style in general. Part B focused on the usage of Chinese and the respondents' views about the language. Part C regarding the views on cultural values, and their preservation and transmission.

The questionnaire was administered in the two schools separately, with the help of the form teachers. Meanwhile, focus groups were also carried out in order to elicit more information to triangulate the data.

Findings and Discussion

- The most frequently used language in communicating with family members (78%), friend and classmates (98%) is Chinese/Mandarin for these respondents. Only 2 students used English most of the time.

- However, the languages that they used in social media are English (57%) and Chinese (49%). None of them prefers Malay as their language for socialization.
- A low 23% respondents expressed they dislike learning Chinese. Besides saying that Chinese is difficult to learn, one of the reasons given is that Chinese is not as important as Malay or English. Actually, this just reflects the true hard fact in the Malaysian context. In public examinations, Chinese Language subject is just an elective, whereas Malay and English are the core papers. It is compulsory to pass Malay Language in order to be awarded the certificate.
- Data shown that the majority of respondents are still very much in support of Chinese language and being proud to be a Chinese.
- 77% respondents like to learn Chinese – Reasons : my mother tongue; easy to learn; useful to know more languages; an important international language; a beautiful language; can know the history and culture of Chinese; like to learn Chinese poems; Chinese class is interesting.
- The respondents acknowledged the significance of learning Chinese. Almost all of them (97%) consented unanimously that a Chinese should know or learn Chinese. They are able to communicate in Chinese (85). In knowing Chinese, all the cultural values and traditions can be preserved and transmitted (62). Moreover, in knowing Chinese would enhance employability (48), as they have an edge over those who are only bilingual. Nevertheless, the percentage for this reason is not that high. Possibly these students still did not think that far ahead of their career in the future. The appreciation of Chinese literature such as poems and other literary masterpieces seems not considered very important by the students (42%). One student expressed that he learnt to write good compositions and poems in class.
- They advocated the Chinese cultural/moral values of integrity (79), respect for teachers and elders(82), filial piety (87), tolerance (69), faithful (68), grateful (77), modest (74), and diligence (78). In addition, a student suggested benevolent and another added '自力更生' i.e. be self-support and do not rely on others. This indeed a very good point as it aptly reflects the real situation in Malaysia.
- 95% of the students agreed that Malaysian Chinese cultures have to be preserved and transmitted from generation to generation.

- A majority of the students (83%) felt that cultures can be preserved and transmitted through education at home; hence parents play a vital role. Teachers in schools also play an important role in this respect (66%). Additionally the Chinese associations should take the lead to organize more cultural activities (70%), and the Chinese community should give full support (54%). Equally important is that more youngsters should be encouraged to take part in these activities. By giving rewards to participants and to hope for government to set up certain policy to help were deemed not so effective (41% respectively). In fact, a few good suggestions were given by the students : make Chinese as the medium of instruction in schools; more publicity of cultural activities by the mass media; and, last but not least, begins with oneself, everyone practice your own culture.
- If given a choice, what nationality/ethnicity you would like to be in your next life ? This was posed as the last question in the questionnaire.
- The majority of the students (62%) said that they preferred to be a Chinese in their next life. The reasons are: I am born Chinese; I like Chinese language; Chinese is multilingual; Chinese has long history and rich cultures; Chinese is intelligent; Chinese will lead the world in the near future; proud to be a Chinese; like Chinese food; Chinese excel in whatever they do.
- 21 students said that they would like to be British/ Americans. Their reasons are : I like to communicate in English; they are helpful and friendly; open-minded; I like their environment and life styles; English is an international language; have more human rights; would like to experience something different from Chinese life styles; envy their appearance and height.
- For those who preferred to be Koreans (11), the reasons given are: Like Korean culture; Koreans are polite and well-mannered; Korean guys are handsome; Korea is a beautiful country; advance country; I like Korean food; like to learn Korean; like to experience the 4 seasons in a year.
- There are 6 students wished to become Japanese if given the choice. The reasons simply they liked Japanese food and very interested in Japanese cultures.
- Numerous cross-cultural studies identify the mass media, particularly television, as a major source of information about cultures. Many scholars have called attention to how damaging stereotyped images can be (Tubbs,

2010, p.304). Truly, what and how the students perceived of the British/American, Koreans, and Japanese are just stereotyped impressions they have seen from the movies or TV programs. Actually a majority of them do not have any personal relationship or experience with these people.

Conclusion

Just as a respondent has said that every ethnicity should preserve and transmit their own cultures and traditions, hence it is just natural to preserve the various cultural identities, languages and values of a nation. In Malaysia, Chinese education is always perceived as playing a crucial role in preserving the Malaysian Chinese cultures.

The findings of this study evidently shown that these Malaysian teenagers have a very strong sense of cultural identity. The question of asking who they would like to be if given the choice, surprisingly the majority of them still preferred to be a Chinese, despite all the influences and impacts of western and Korean cultures. The majority of them expressed their pride in being a Chinese and advocated all the positive cultural values. Is this signify the success of Chinese education in Malaysia? This indeed very interesting and further exploration can be carried out.

On the other hand, no doubt, Malay and English are still considered the two most important languages in education in the Malaysian context. The status of Chinese language is not comparable to them yet. However, the findings of this study shows that the students are not using much Malay in their daily life and in communication. Is it due to their proficiency level in Malay, or perceived it solely as the national language and the medium of instruction in schools? Intercultural communication and interactions perhaps would seek resolutions for any misunderstanding or misconception that caused by cultural barriers and thus enhance nation integration. More comparative studies could be carried for the various cultures in Malaysia specifically, and globally in general.

The preservation of cultural identity should not regarded as detrimental to the fostering of national unity, but instead, contributes to the diversity in the multilingual and multicultural society of Malaysia

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